

## Hummer's Bell

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## HUMMER'S BELL.

BY SANFORD W. HUFF, M. D.

Ah, Hummer's bell! Ah, Hummer's bell!  
We've heard thy last, thy funeral knell,  
And what an aching void is left,  
Of bell and Hummer both bereft.  
*Thou*, deeply sunk in running stream,  
*Him* in a Swedenborgian dream.  
Both are submerged, both, to our cost,  
Alike to sense and reason lost.

WM. H. TUTHILL.

Twenty years ago, at Iowa City, then a thrifty village with green pasture plats, and hazel covered hillocks, and unbridged brooks, and bridle paths, in places where now are business blocks, and closely tenanted squares, and gardened enclosures, and public highways, there occurred one of those intense public excitements which come not often to a community. It was occasioned by the rapidly spread rumor that one Rev. Michael Hummer, a noted character, was making demonstration toward the removal of the bell from the new North Presbyterian Church.

This Hummer had once served this Church as its pastor, but that relationship had been broken off some months before by formal ecclesiastical action. From all the facts which we have gathered from the old settlers and other sources, concerning this Reverend gentleman, it is not too much to say that he was a subject of very general dislike, and his presence in the neighborhood dreaded by many, in consequence of their belief in his unscrupulousness of character. Whatever may have been the foundation of this belief, whether justified by his previous acts or not, we do not pretend to say. It is patent from the testimony that such feeling existed.

The character of the man in the opinions of his former flock, and the peculiar character of the act he had essayed to perpetrate, are the sources of the profound emotion produced within the breasts of the astonished citizens.

It must be remembered that a bell in a "Church steeple," at that day, was a thing of a value not easily measured; and this particular bell was to the community a treasure. It was

the only one, not only in the town, but the only one west of the Mississippi towns; possibly even those towns had not yet reached that point of social maturity to be called together by the "Sabbath bell." How that may be, we are not advised. This bell was "alone in its glory" in all the country round about. Not only so, but it was intrinsically a gem of a bell. Its material was of unusual fineness; its tones were of unusual clearness and sweetness; it rang out its music from the Church belfry, on Sabbath mornings, with a resonance that reached to remote neighborhoods, and bade the flock "come," and conveyed to them the Church's welcome. And besides, it was a *gift*, and as such sacred. Large-hearted Christian men of the afar-off "down East," sympathizing with the Christian efforts to establish Churches in the frontier settlements, and recognizing the difficulties under which Church edifices were built and Church appointments procured, had caused it to be cast out of the choicest material, and sent as a gift to this Church. Upon it was engraved the names of the donors and the Church for which it was made.

In view of all these relative points of interest, it was a thing of pride to all the people. Whether a member or not of the church that wore it, each inhabitant felt that he had an individual interest and ownership in it.

In summing up these facts concerning it, it is not difficult in imagination to comprehend the "scene" when the word passed from one to another that Hummer was in the act of abducting this people's jewel from its aerial casket. But it is only through the imagination with these conditions understood that that public sensation becomes appreciable now, to those with whom church bells are a matter of course; trifles in value to the wealthy congregations of the present day, and little regarded because so common. The public excitement was intense. History is said to repeat itself. Could some ancient Puritan who witnessed the "descent" of the

"Famous Captain Kid  
As most wickedly he did  
Sail"

into the harbor of some lonely seaport village of New Eng-

land, to the dismay of the villagers, have realized Dr. Franklin's wish of the possibility of being hermetically sealed within a vessel of proper capacity and kept in a state of suspended animation for a few generations, and then resuscitated to look out upon his country—to such an ancient, looking upon Hummer's ascent to the belfry, and then upon the public agitation which it produced, there would have been no doubt a recognition of a historic repetition of the old-time sea side panic at sight of the pirate Captain's craft.

The ground of Hummer's proceeding grew out of the fact, we suppose, of his having been the church's agent in receiving, or rather the agent of the donors in conveying it to its destination; or both. Out of this relationship to the parties to the transaction, he either had acquired, or found ground for an excuse to lay a claim of ownership to the bell; notwithstanding it had been delivered to the church as its property, and had been in its undisputed possession many months; notwithstanding it carried upon its brazen bosom the lettered vouchers of the church's ownership; notwithstanding he had ceased to be the church's agent or pastor.

But to return to the "scene." Capt. Irish in his recently published history of Johnson County, (October number *Annals*, 1868,) has given a graphic description of the transactions of the eventful day of Hummer's attempted abduction, which made it famous, and fixed upon, it for all time to come, the style and title of "Hummer's bell."

While we would refer our readers to that history for the particulars of the story, it is necessary to the continuity of our sketch to give a condensed statement, which we will do in a few sentences, drawing our facts chiefly from the history above mentioned.

Hummer had an accomplice; the accomplice staid below and Hummer ascended the belfry, unhung the bell and lowered it to the ground; the accomplice went for the wagon to convey it away; Hummer "waited for the wagon" in the belfry; citizens remove the ladder; Hummer is a prisoner in the belfry; citizens bring a wagon; Hummer indulges in powerful expletives, threatens war, and lets slip such warlike

missiles at the heads of the throng as his limited arsenal afforded, consisting of pieces of scantling, fragments of boards and brick. Citizens load the bell into the wagon, Hummer helplessly "sees it" all; the wagon is driven away; the bell disappears, and Hummer "don't see it" any more forever. Citizens mockingly rejoice and go their respective ways; Hummer is kept "in durance vile" until accomplice arrives, and by replacing the ladder lets him down. The bell is secretly deposited at the bottom of the Iowa river. But the citizens have seen and heard it for the last time, for it was stolen from the hidlers, and re-hidden at another point of the river, where it remained until it was ultimately transported secretly to Salt Lake City and sold to the prophet of all the Mormons, where it has remained in seclusion until a recent date.

Silent, so the story goes; not a tone of its sweetness has ever been wasted upon the desert air of that remote region; literally, "mute as a bell without a clapper," for its clapper was left behind when it was spirited away,—a lonesome, rusty and unlovely thing in its enforced divorcement, now and for years past doomed to inactive imprisonment in the cellar of Thomas Hughes, Esq.

At that time Iowa City was the Capital of the State, and hence its legislative, judicial and political center. Hither came men from every section, on business relating to these departments, and others, of public affairs. The story of Hummer's strange proceeding and the denouement was told them; the public indignation sympathized with; the story repeated; commented upon; laughed at; rhymed about; reported to their home newspapers as an item of startling news from the Capital; and thus received publicity throughout the State. The bell became famous and Hummer notorious.

We said that it was rhymed about. The poetic effusion with which we have introduced this sketch, dates back to that day. It was the production of a *legal gang* in a jolly hour between the court sittings. The inceptive movement of the "Nine" being given by Hon. John P. Cook, then a "gay and festive" genius of both law and song, who improvised



the first verse of the song of which our quotation is a part, and sung it to the judge and attorneys to their infinite delight.

"Ah, Hummer's bell ! Ah, Hummer's bell,  
How many a tale of woe 'twould tell  
Of Hummer driving up to town  
To take the brazen jewel down;  
And when high up in his belfree  
They moved the ladder, yes sir-e-e;  
Thus while he towered aloft they say  
The bell took wings and flew away."

After several encores the muses, always capricious, seeming to have deserted their first favorite, passed their inspiration to another of the convivial gang, Hon. Wm. H. Tuthill, who then and there produced the balance of the song with a spirit which gives evidence of the possession of the needful "afflatus," and with a finish which gives equal evidence of the scholar. The whole song, the production of this festive occasion, in which several gentlemen since eminent in the State, participated, may be found in the July number of the ANNALS for 1864.

Many years passed before any definite clue was had of the bell. Rumor, with its many tongues, located it here and there, and thither, in a great variety of places;—in wells, in vaults, in the earth, in the river ; southward, northward, in the town center.

We have learned from the unwritten history concerning the affair, that Hummer consulted certain "spirits" with which he was said to be in supposed "rapport," and that they rapped out the intelligence that it was buried beneath the State House.

By the way, we hope to be indulged in an "*aside*" remark here—that we have our opinion of these spirits. We have no very high opinion of the whole class of these invisibles who go rapping about against plastered walls and bed-posts and tables, and tipping over valuable furniture, and breaking crockery "by order" of sickly women for the edification of weakly men. We think it an exhibition of bad taste, to say the least, for the perpetration of which sane men would be called to an account, and children called naughty, and per-

haps treated to a punishment peculiar to youthful years. But these particular spirits, we believe to have been of the lying and good-for-nothing kind. We insist on being understood that we do not present this as a historical fact, but as our opinion, for the defense of which we have two good reasons which we are not averse to giving. First, because of the statement hereinbefore made concerning the whereabouts of the bell, which shows their designation of its locality to have been an untruth. Secondly, because of the fact that they were so utterly useless in their "sphere," so utterly "out of a job" as to have nothing better on hands than to enter into the service of a man whose many imbroglis, to say the least, had destroyed his influence for rendering of any available use the trans-valley intelligence which they imparted, a condition of inutility to which we cannot think any good honest spirit would like to confess.

But to return to the bell. Years passed and no definite tidings of it came. Finally, a returned California gold-seeker "confessed to the soft impeachment" of having been one of a party who removed it on his out-going trip to Salt Lake City. This was believed by some; by others not. Salt Lake in those days was a great way off, and communication slow and interrupted. No further corroboration of the statement came, and after many years the subject died out of the conversation, but lived in the memory of the old settlers. And this brings us to a letter from the Mormon Prophet.

While engaged in the preparation of his County history, Capt. Irish had occasion to examine the records of the Presbyterian Church, through Rev. S. M. Osmond, its pastor, whose interest became so thoroughly awakened concerning the bell, under the developments of this investigation and these interviews, that he addressed at once a letter of enquiry to Brigham Young, and by return mail received the following

EPISTLE OF THE PROPHET OF THE LATTER DAY SAINTS.

SALT LAKE CITY, U. T., 3d November, 1868.

REV. S. M. OSMOND, *Iowa City, Iowa:*

Sir—Your favor of the 18th inst. is before me. It is now several years since I first learned the history of the bell about which you write me, and I at once

caused Mr. Asa Calkins, one of my clerks, who resided at Iowa City at the time the occurrence took place, and who was acquainted with all the circumstances relating thereto, to write to the Pastor and Deacons of the Church to which it belonged, telling them it was laying here, was no use to us, and was subject to their order, and would be delivered to them on their meeting the expenses.

Your letter is the first I have heard about the matter since that time. The bell is still laying here idle, as it always has done, and is at your disposal on the same conditions, whenever you please to send for it, accompanied with sufficient evidence that you are authorized to receive it for the congregation for whom it was manufactured.

Yours respectfully,

BRIGHAM YOUNG.

Thus it will be seen that the bell is at last certainly found. It will again discourse its music from its ancient site. The place has been kept vacant for its restoration. With a strange presentiment of the wanderer's ultimate return, which has seemed at times like infatuation, has this wealthy Church declined the procurement of another for the vacant place.

But it comes back to speak to another generation—a stranger people. Not one in a thousand of those who will listen to its returned cadences, will have ever listened to them before. The hand that applied its first fastenings lies in ashes in the cemetery. He whose hand guided the rein when it was borne from the Church and secreted from Hummer's reach (Eli Myers), sleeps across the plains; and few there are of those who rallied to its defense in that hour of its peril, will be here to give it welcome. Its tones, as they strike the public ear on the first Sabbath morning of its return, will be a sermon enforcing with more than human emphasis the text that

"Life! It is even a vapor that appeareth for a little time and then vanisheth away."

And the recoiling sound-wave as it is sent in echo from hill and forest, will repeat the preaching,

Life \* \* \* \* vanisheth away.



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